Status of the reflexive element ’se’ with verbs of grooming and bodily care in Croatian

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In Croatian, the test that determines the distinction between true reflexive verbs and other reflexive verbs is the test of substitution of the reflexive element ’se’ with ’sebe’, the stressed accusative form of the reflexive pronoun. Only true reflexive verbs pass this test. It is commonly claimed in Croatian literature on reflexives that so-called verbs of grooming and bodily care (e.g. ’prati se’ wash, ’odijevati se’ ’dress’) also fulfil this requirement. Data from actual language usage (e.g. Croatian National Corpus, Web corpus), however, refute this claim and show that these verbs very rarely occur with the stressed form ’sebe’. True reflexive verbs, on the other hand, are statistically more frequently found with the stressed pronoun ’sebe’. In addition, ’sebe’ with true reflexive verbs is utilized for a number of functions: focus, shift in reference, contrast, while ’sebe’ with grooming verbs is found only in the contexts of a strong contrast. All this evidence will be used to support the claim that grooming verbs are in fact only marginally reflexive and constitute the transitional class between true and non-true reflexive verbs. These findings fit well into the tendencies observed in other languages of the world (Kemmer 1993: 58–67), where grooming verbs often show middle marking instead of the reflexive one. These tendencies can be accounted for on functional grounds, since grooming actions are prototypically performed on one’s own body and are rarely expected to be performed on someone else.

References


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